

# Walking the Lebanon Mountain Trail

The Lebanon Mountain Trail offers charm, spirit and beauty in a country that is still bearing the scars of its long civil war

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- [Kevin Gould](#)
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Lebanon Mountain Trail guide Muni Bawadi beneath a cedar tree. Photograph: Kevin Gould. Click on the magnifying glass icon to see a map of Lebanon

It is 441km from top to tail. It joins together in peace, villages and communities that were once more used to bombing each other. It protects precious, vulnerable mountains, forests and valleys. It is a walk through cloud forests and lost hamlets, through holy shrines, lonely orchards and 6,000 years of human history – including WWE wrestling. It is the [Lebanon](#) Mountain Trail.

Lebanon is half the size of Wales, and most of its 4 million souls live along its narrow Mediterranean strip. Inland, the country is dominated by massive mountain ranges with a limited road network that can make an inch on the map equal to two hours in a car. I'm walking sections of the trail through the Chouf mountains, leaving from the Druze village of

Barouk, 50km from Beirut. Nabil, my Beiruti taxi driver, might as well be in Africa, so foreign is this rural trip to him. "*Incroyable!*" he exclaims as we crest the mountain pass at Ain Zhalta, and "*doucement*, Nabil!" as his ancient Mercedes hits 40kmph and tears worryingly round barrier-free, hairpin bends.

Nabil somehow pilots us, *sans* headlights, brake lights or a third gear, to the hillside home of Akram Mahmoud in Barouk. In 2005, the Lebanon Mountain Trail Association (LMTA) managed to charm \$5m out of USAID and the Lebanese diaspora to map, blaze and manage their trail and to promote environmentally and socially responsible tourism, thus encouraging people like Akram to open their homes as guesthouses along the route.

Akram's place is comfy and clean with lots of hot water, and electricity until 11pm. I wake to shy, slanting sunbeams playing across the valley and a breakfast of homemade fig jam, white cheese (known as *labne*), olives and *manakeesh* – warm wholemeal flatbreads spread with wild thyme, toasted sesame and lemony sumac, slicked with Akram's olive oil. I eat four, reasoning that I'll soon be walking them off.

Having divided the trail into 26 sections, the LMTA has trained the guides you hire in each village that take trekkers along each stage. My guide today is Muni Bawadi.

"Kevin?" he asks "Like Kevin von Erich?" It seems that during the war years of 1975-1990, there would be a ceasefire each Wednesday evening as opposing factions tuned in to WWE wrestling, whose pretty-boy star was said Kevin. Yes, Muni, I say – a similar Kevin. Muni calmly sizes up the condition this Kevin is now in, and the size of the breakfast I've just pigged, and suggests he'll send my pack forward to the start of tomorrow's section as today's walk might be a little "up and down".



Chouf mountains

viewed from a cedar tree. Photograph: Kevin Gould

Akram drives us to the start of the stage. En route, I'm introduced to the *mukhtar*, or headman, Youssef Halawiyeh, as Kevin, old-timer star of all-in tag.

At 800m above sea level, a barrier marks the entrance to the Shouf biosphere reserve, through which the LMTA has blazed its main trail; there are also 280km of side trails. This protected area comprises 5% of Lebanon and is home to its largest cedar forest and to more wild boar, hyenas and wolves than they can currently count.

Muni isn't one for hanging about and we're soon walking quickly uphill, past a 1961 fire engine with which the Biosphere volunteers try to fight the inevitable forest fires. A sweaty hour later and we're at 1,850m, with my lungs making Nabil's asthmatic taxi sound like a Daimler. The view, though, is worth a thousand wheezy climbs. Below us, Barouk relaxes in bright autumn sunshine; to our left, the blunt peak of Jabal el Barouk snuggles under a duvet of thick white cloud. All around us are thousands of cedar trees, whose resinous clean smell sharpens the senses and clears my head – if not my manakeesh-heavy digestion.

The poet Alphonse de Lamartine came here in 1832. He sat in contemplation under the feathery green arms of a huge, clifftop cedar that was even then perhaps 2,000 years old. Muni and I loll there today on a carpet of cedar needles, cracking walnuts and jokes, and munching on apples and fresh yellow dates.

Before lunch we tramp down to calm, quiet Maaser el Chouf, where the biosphere HQ is in a restored Ottoman house from where you can also hire bikes. Maaser is a mixed Druze and Christian village where, in 1983, 63 Christian women, children and men were massacred by their neighbours.

You simply cannot escape the past in Lebanon, whether it's the tank road bulldozed by Israelis through the silent cedars above us, or the upside-down triangles we see all alongside the trail, warning of landmines. But there's no market for war here just now, and initiatives such as the LMTA seed and breed a very welcome peace.

The day ends at Baadaran at the end of a 1950s airstrip in a remote pine clifftop cabin with an en suite shower. There's no electricity until 2am, and no sound save some hyenas across the valley and distant village dogs. I wake at dawn to the crack of small-arms fire, fearing war, but finding instead that it's illegal hunters massacring tiny crakes, snipes and larks: Lebanon is among the planet's important staging posts for migratory birds, with millions passing through each spring and autumn.

Nazir, today's guide, brings me a champion wrestler's breakfast after which we thrash along a path where he cuts through huge thornbushes with his staff and along ancient, stone-stacked terraces. We chat in a stodgy mix of Arabic, English and French, and munch on juicy wild grapes at a dry wadi before attempting the steep climb to the sleepy village of Jbaa. As the landscape changes from wild to human-tamed, we pass tiny groves of fruit trees. At one, a venerable Druze gentleman picking apples smilingly insists we take a dozen.



Ixsir winery in

Batroun. Photograph: Kevin Gould

As Nazir and I saunter, refreshed from Jbaa, we're pressed to accept handfuls of roasted pumpkin seeds, huge bunches of chilled green grapes, squashy black figs and many more apples by villagers and farmers along the way. Late afternoon finds us in Niha: after Jbaa, Niha's dozen shops and single bar (which shows WWE on a huge screen) make it seem like New York. My host here is Chafik Merchad. In the mid 1980s, he picked up a landmine which blew off both hands and wrists, and left him with only 20% of his hearing.

Chafik is charming, witty and energetic. He serves me chilled apple juice and speaks beautiful English (and Russian – the Druze are led by socialists and many of their brightest received a Russian education). He and his wife, Sahar, cook a dinner that includes the most delicious chicken-rice dish I've ever eaten. Everything in the meal, save the rice and the bread, was grown by them. Chafik is a published author who writes his romantic poetry with a biro wedged between what's left of his arms.

Next morning, he's reciting *ghazals* over breakfast as LMTA's Christian Akhrass joins me to walk my final day, to Jezzine. The weather so far has been glorious so I send my waterproofs ahead with my pack and,

Kevin von Erich-style, I kiss my biceps and suggest to the graciously bemused villagers that, "I'm Ready to Rumble". Almost immediately we're into a sobering 1km climb along the oak-and pine-forested path that zigzags every few metres up the near-vertical slope. We're rewarded at the summit by the Nabi Ayoub shrine to the prophet Job (who may have lived here). I would like to live there too, high above the clouds, feeling like the peregrine falcon that plummets past us on its way to a lunch date.

In the rocky hills behind the shrine, there's a shepherd and his flock of black goats in the distance, and hawthorn trees from which to pick tart yellow berries.



Strong coffee

proved plentiful, and necessary for the trip. Photograph: Kevin Gould

The biblical, torrential rain comes with no warning. One minute we're hot and dry, the next, sopping wet. There's nothing for it but to squish on to the troglodyte Niha Fort where, in turn, crusaders, Mameluks, Emir Fakreddine and his Ottoman oppressors were all garrisoned. Here 700 soldiers could hide unseen, and control the Sidon-Bekaa road half a mile below. Here, Christian and I dry out in the guardian's kiosk, sipping thick Arabic coffee before the two-hour lope to the town of Jezzine.

The Israelis only left these mountains in 2000, and evidence of their trenches and emplacements, and those of the Lebanese army, remain. One route to Jezzine today would take us through a Hezbollah checkpoint – a place worth avoiding for those of us with foreign passports. Instead, we follow an old goat track past long-abandoned terraced pomegranate groves, where we help ourselves to their ruby-ripe fruit.

Jezzine, with its elegant, Italianate architecture, is overlooked by two huge crucifixes and is home to a souk where you're offered blingy hand-

made cutlery, crispy breads, sun-dried grapes that smell of the mountains and local wines that taste as you'd imagine they might have in the times of Job and Jesus. At Mardakouche restaurant, we eat a hero's dinner (with complementary boiled snails served after dessert) before retiring to the smart, cool [Iris Flower Hotel](#) for hot showers and cold beers.

Before I walked this short stretch of the Lebanon Mountain Trail my wife asked would I be safe? Would I come back dead? Well, my wonderful guides ensured my safety, always, and walking this trail gave me a precious insight into Lebanese village life, renewed respect for the indomitable Lebanese spirit, a fresh interest in WWE – and the feeling of being thrillingly, actively alive.

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## Way to go

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### Getting there

British Airways (0844 493 0787, [ba.com](http://ba.com)) provided the flights. Direct flights from Heathrow to Beirut start from £410 return

### Trekking

Caroll Feghali of Ibex Ecotourism (+961 1216299, [lebanontrail.org](http://lebanontrail.org)) provided the trip and guides and organises regular and bespoke treks along the Lebanon Mountain Trail from \$100pp per day, including accommodation and food. Walks along the trail should not be undertaken without a guide. The latest Foreign Office advice on travel to the country is at [gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/lebanon](http://gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/lebanon)

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## Six more walking holiday adventures

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### Cornish coastal path, England

This clifftop path was carved out in the 19th century as a patrol ground for customs officers looking for smugglers. Now, it's part of the extensive [South West Coast Path](#), and you're more likely to see walkers wandering from fishing village to cove, from Bude in the north to Falmouth in the south. The path is easy for independent holidaymakers to tackle, with plenty of B&Bs, but for help with accommodation and luggage transportation, try Load Off Your Back, who offers three to nine-day self-guided routes, with accommodation included in the price.

• *From £285pp for four nights, [loadoffyourback.co.uk](http://loadoffyourback.co.uk)*

### West Cork and Kerry, Ireland

South-west Ireland's rugged landscape provides challenging walking, including the Three Sisters cliffs on the Dingle Way and the remote Black valley on the Kerry Way. The islands are also fascinating to

explore on foot, from the uninhabited Blasket Islands, with their colonies of seabirds, to the monastic remains on Skellig Michael. New company Wilderness Ireland has a seven-day guided walking holiday on the mainland and islands, starting and finishing in Cork.

- *From £1,066pp including guesthouse accommodation, most meals and all transport, departs 15 June and 17 August, 01479 420020*[wildernessireland.com](http://wildernessireland.com)

### **Provence, France**

This year is the 160th anniversary of the birth of Vincent van Gogh, who was greatly inspired by the landscape of Provence. Walkers can cross the Alpilles mountain range to visit St-Rémy, Les Baux-de-Provence and Arles. The wheatfields, vineyards, orchards and cypresses of the region are instantly recognisable from some of Van Gogh's most famous works. Sherpa Expeditions has a seven-day, self-guided trip to Van Gogh's Provence, starting in Avignon and finishing in Arles.

- *From £830pp including accommodation in two-star hotels, breakfast and four dinners, 020-8572 9788, [sherpa-walking-holidays.co.uk](http://sherpa-walking-holidays.co.uk)*

### **Corfu trail, Greece**

This 138-mile route along the length of Corfu starts and finishes at beautiful beaches, but the bulk of the trail crosses the unspoiled interior. The terrain is mainly undulating mule tracks through forests and alongside rivers, until you reach the wilder, more mountainous north. To walk the route independently, find more information at [thecorfutrail.com](http://thecorfutrail.com) and download the official guide at [corfutrailguide.com](http://corfutrailguide.com) (£8.50). Alternatively, Explore has an eight-day guided trip.

- *From £694pp, including flights, accommodation in simple hotels, breakfast and two dinners, and baggage transfers, departures in May and September, 0845 291 4541, [explore.co.uk](http://explore.co.uk)*

### **Jesus trail, Israel**

As well as the famous Camino de Santiago in Spain, Camino Ways offers [walking holidays](http://walkingholidays.com) along ancient pilgrimage routes. One of the most intriguing is the "Jesus trail" from Nazareth to Capernaum in Galilee, northern Israel. A 40-mile hike through forested highlands connects Tabgha, said to be the site of the miracle of the loaves and fishes, the Mount of Beatitudes, scene of the Sermon on the Mount, and the Sea of Galilee.

- *From £653 for five nights half-board, year round, 020-3468 1516, [caminoways.com](http://caminoways.com).*

## **Tien Shan mountains, Kyrgyzstan**

The Terksey Ala-Too mountains, within the Tien Shan range in central Asia, are an untouched wilderness, with glacial valleys sheltering snow leopards and the second biggest mountain lake in the world. Walks Worldwide is organising a "recce" adventure there this summer for pioneering trekkers.

- *From £1,395 for a 14-day guided expedition, departs 13 July, 0845 301 4737, [walksworldwide.com](http://walksworldwide.com)*

**Rachel Dixon**